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Gosse, (Sir) Edmund William
The Milton manuscripts at Trinity

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THE MILTON MANUSCRIPTS AT TRINITY.

When Charles Lamb originally printed his Oxford in the Vacation, in The London Magazine for October, 1820, he followed his remark, "Still less have I curiosity to disturb the elder repose of MSS.," by the following capricious reflections: —

"I had thought of Lycidas as of a full-grown beauty — as springing up with all its parts absolute — till, in an evil hour, I was shown the original copy of it, together with the other minor poems of its author, in the Library at Trinity, kept like some treasure to be proud of. I wish they had thrown them in the Cam, or sent them after the latter cantos of Spenser, into the Irish Channel. How it staggered me to see the fine things in their ore! interlined, corrected! as if their words were mortal, alterable, displaceable at pleasure! as if they might have been otherwise, and just as good! as if inspiration was made up of parts, and these fluctuating, successive, indifferent! I will never go into the workshop of any great artist again, nor desire a sight of his picture till it is fairly off the easel; no, not if Raphael were to be alive again, and painting another Galatea."

When Lamb came to read over these sentences, he was perhaps struck with their petulance, for they were omitted from the completed Essays of Elia in 1823. They represent merely a little eddy in the backwater of the critic's mind, and it would be unfair indeed to pin him down to a whimsical utterance which he deliberately repudiated. But these forgotten phrases have a certain charm of their own, and they introduce, if only in a spirit of contradiction, the subject of this paper.

It was probably in 1799 or 1800 that either Lloyd or Manning showed Lamb the handsome volume in which the manuscripts of Milton reposed in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge. A hundred years had passed since they had been presented to that society; another hundred have now gone by since Lamb inspected them in a mood so surprisingly unsympathetic. It has gradually been recognized that these leaves constitute, in the words of the present Vice Master of the college, "the chief treasure of Trinity Library," rich though that library be in wealth which is even yet not completely estimated. It is well that the authorities of the college should have been awakened at last to the absolutely unique and incomparable value of this possession, for it has taken the greater part of two centuries to make them aware of it; and, in the meantime, very considerable injury has been done to the precious tome, not only by the carelessness and even by the greedy dishonesty of visitors, but, as Mr. Aldis Wright says, "by the rough manner in which it was patched, to remedy the mischief caused by unintelligent admiration." I shall presently speak of the most extraordinary mutilation which it has suffered.

The natural and obvious result of the quickening of the college conscience has been to make it increasingly difficult for visitors to examine the Milton manuscripts with any closeness. The utmost courtesy had always been shown in welcoming any scholar who desired to make a collation or trace a reading. But a more and more salutary and jealous care has deprecated idle examination of the manuscripts, and has even been slow to permit those who can give an account of their interest to touch or handle the frail leaves which are so far more precious than rubies. The consequence is that, without being unknown, the manuscripts of Milton at Trinity have practi-

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cally become inaccessible to the student, who, if he were privileged to hold the "pompous volume" for an instant in his hands, was far too greatly overwhelmed with the honor and alarmed by his responsibility to make any literary use of it. The authorities of Trinity College, divided between the sense of the solemn trust which the possession of the most interesting of all English manuscripts lays upon them and the wish not to act like dogs in a manger, have at last hit upon an admirable solution of the dilemma. Under the superintendence of that great scholar, to whom English literature and Cambridge alike owe so much, Mr. Aldis Wright, they have issued, in a limited edition, in very sumptuous form, an exact and complete facsimile of their Milton manuscripts. They may now inclose their treasure in a crystal casket; the excuse for its being touched by even the most learned scholar is gone. Now, too, for the first time, we can examine in peace, and without a beating heart and blinded eyes, the priceless thing in its minutest features.

It should be stated in what condition the manuscripts came to Trinity. In 1691, — seventeen years after the death of Milton, and when his poetry was just beginning to be recognized as a national glory, — Sir Henry Newton-Puckering, a considerable benefactor to the library of the college, presented to it nearly four thousand volumes. At this time, the Master was the Hon. John Montague, the immediate predecessor of Bentley. It appears that among the donations of Sir Henry Puckering was one which outweighed all the others in value, but was entirely unobserved. This was a packet of thirty loose and tattered folio leaves, almost covered with the handwriting of Milton. During the next forty years, these leaves must have brushed the very confines of dissolution; at any moment the caprice of an ignorant custodian might have condemned them to the flames. It is odd to think that the great Bentley, deeply interested alike in texts and in Milton, had these originals at his elbow for forty years, and never suspected their existence.

It is supposed that about the year 1735 they attracted the notice of the Woodwardian Professor of Geology, Charles Mason, who had succeeded Conyers Middleton in 1731, and who was an investigator of books and libraries. He put a note upon them, — "Milton's Juvenile Poems, etc., seemingly the original," — and he drew the attention of a person more purely literary than himself to the value of his discovery. Thomas Clarke — afterwards Sir Thomas, and Master of the Rolls — "was always a lover of the Muses," and he was at the expense of a handsome shrine for the dijected members of "the most learned and almost divine Poet." But Clarke left Trinity soon after, and the guardianship of the richly bound, thin folio seems to have passed back into the hands of Mason until his death in 1762. During the eighteenth century, from the year 1738, when Birch first made reference to them, the manuscripts were frequently appealed to as authorities by the annotators and editors of Milton.

Mr. Aldis Wright speaks ruefully of the advantages which these early critics had in consulting the folio before it had "suffered from the carelessness with which it was too freely shown to visitors." Even Lamb — the unthankful Elia — had an opportunity of glancing at what we shall never see. During the present century, — indeed, not more than (I believe) forty years ago, — a slip fastened on the inside of one of the pages of the manuscript of Comus, and containing seventeen lines of that poem intended to take the place of those on the opposite page, was stolen. It was securely gummed or pasted on, and it resisted so successfully the snatch with which the thief tore at it that the initial letters of thirteen of the lines remained on the fragment which is left. A great

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mystery is involved in this remarkable and useless theft, and there are old men who shake their heads, and "could tell, an they would," strange tales about it.

The psychology of this curious little crime has always fascinated me. I imagine the nameless culprit, certainly a man of education and position, perhaps a clergyman, doubtless a scholar of repute, walking down the florid cloisters of Neville's Court in company with a dignified college don, his friend, or a new acquaintance to whom he has been solemnly recommended. They are on the cloistered staircase, and no thought of guile is in the heart of the visitor. A heavy door wheels open, and they pass over the tessellated pavement, and between the long ranges of "storied urn or animated bust." The languorous statue of Byron looks down upon them without suspicion, as they advance; in the strange colored window blazing at the end, Sir Isaac Newton is led by the University of Cambridge (a foolish female form) to where Bacon is sitting at the feet of King George III. And still, in the magnificence and silence, no guile is in the heart of the visitor. Then, carelessly, among other objects of interest, his conductor places in his hand the folio manuscripts of Milton. He turns the pages; it rolls in upon him that this is the very handwriting of the sublimest of the English poets. He turns the leaves more slowly; here in Comus is a slip that seems loose! And now the devil is raging in the visitor's bosom; the collector awakens in him, the bibliomaniac is unchained. His college companion, all unsuspecting, turns into another bay, to select another object. In an instant the unpremeditated crime is committed; the slip is snatched out and thrust into the visitor's pocket, but so violently is it plucked that it tears, and the damning evidence of theft (and such a theft!) clings to the outraged volume forever.

The conducting don has observed nothing, and the desultory exhibition continues. More objects have to be observed, more curiosities admired. And the miserable malefactor, with that paper corpse bleeding against his breast, must lounge along the dreadful cases, interrogate his terrific companion, govern his pulsing throat by some herculean effort of the will. At last they leave the stately Library, become, to the visitor, a mere shambles, a house of invisible murder. How he totters down the marble staircase; how the great door, grinding on its hinges, pierces between his bones and marrow! And so he goes back to his own place, certain that sooner or later his insane crime will be discovered, certain that his part in it will become patent to the custodians of the college, certain of silent infamy and unaccusing outlawry, with no consolation but that sickening fragment of torn verse, which he can never show to a single friend, can never sell nor give nor bequeath; which is inherently too precious to destroy, and which is so deadly in its association that he will never trust himself to look at it, though his family are all abroad, and he locked into his study. Among literary criminals, I know not another who so burdens the imagination as this wretched mutilator of Comus.

It is the opinion of Mr. Aldis Wright that the earliest part of the precious manuscripts was written in 1633. The year before, a friend at Cambridge — perhaps Charles Diodati — had taken Milton to task for allowing Time, "the subtle thief of youth," to steal on his wing his three and twentieth year. Milton had come to the conclusion that the university was unfavorable to the development of his mind, and that it was proper for him to withdraw to a solitary place and labor under the "great Task-master's eye." He had lately said, in a letter, the first draft of which is preserved among the Trinity manuscripts, "I am sometimes[1] suspicious of myself, and do take notice of a certain belatedness in me." He had

[1] Not "something," as usually quoted.

become conscious of "a mind made and set wholly on the accomplishment of greatest things." Nor was he much in doubt what form his work should take, "in English or other tongue, prosing or versing, but chiefly this later, the style by certain vital signs being likely to live." In this solemn confidence, in this stately temper of self-consecration to the art of poetry, Milton left Cambridge toward the close of 1632.

He was in his father's hands, but we learn from the poem Ad Patrem that no difficulties were placed in the way of his dedication. At an age when a profession, a lucrative mode of life of some sort or other, is deemed imperative by most parents, the elder Milton consented to allow his son "to wander, a happy companion of Apollo, far from the noise of town, and shut up in deep retreats." Accordingly he joined his parents in their house at Horton, and there he lived through some five years of happy retirement, devoted to poetry, music, and mathematics. The volume at Trinity College is evidently the notebook in which, during those blossoming years, he was in the habit of putting down the first drafts of his poems, and in which he corrected, tested, and polished them

What Horton was like, in those days, the reader of L'Allegro and Il Penseroso divines. It was a rural solitude,

> "Where the rude axe, with heavèd stroke,
> Was never heard the nymphs to daunt,
> Or fright them from their hallow'd haunt."

It is still a village, and still in front of the altar of its rustic church may be deciphered the lettering of the tomb where Milton's mother was buried in 1637. But Horton has lost its charm. Its monumental oaks and elms have fallen before the "rude axe;" its lovely, sleepy river, the Colne, has become a canal for commerce; its long meadows, undulating to the far-off keep of Windsor Castle, "bosomed high in tufted trees," have sunken to the market-garden aspect. It is the misfortune of Horton, in fact, to be only seventeen miles from London, and its freshness, its "glimmering bowers" and "secret shades," have been exchanged for glaring suburban villas. But in the reign of Charles I. this little southern spur of the county of Bucks was still an unravished home of loveliness and quietude, and here Milton, through five delicious years, cultivated to the highest the magnificent powers of his genius.

We have spoken of the Milton book at Trinity as being the most precious manuscript of English literature in the world, and the longer we consider its constitution, the less likely are we to dispute this claim. Nothing of Shakespeare's work remains in his own handwriting; nothing important, so far as we know, of Chaucer's or of Spenser's. Of later poets, indeed, we possess manuscripts of more or less value and interest. But in no other case that I can recall, ancient or modern, has it been our privilege to examine the sheets in which, through several years of the highest creative intensity, a great poet has left on record the very movement of his mind and the hesitations and selections of his art in the act of its production. When that poet is Milton, the most splendid artist in verse whom the English race has produced, the importance of the document stands revealed beyond any need of emphasis or insistence. Now, in the Trinity manuscript, everything is the unquestioned handwriting of Milton, except some of the sonnets, which have evidently been copied by successive amanuenses.

The volume begins with Arcades, where the poet made a false start in the opening lines; his first thought being to write, —

> "Look, nymphs and shepherds, look, here ends
> our quest,
> Since at last our eyes are blest."

Unfortunately, these pages have been sadly tattered, and one whole margin of each of them appears to have been

snipped away, for neatness' sake, by "the abhorred shears" of somebody, when they were bound, a hundred and sixty years ago. This is, however, the less important, as the corrections in Arcades are comparatively few.

Next follows At a Solemn Music, also badly mutilated. Here Milton is seen to be greatly perplexed with contending plans, and the entire poem is twice canceled, with strong cross pen-lines, and a third time written. We examine the two canceled forms of the ode with particular curiosity, since Milton's failures are more than most men's successes. Here are two lost lines: —

"While all the starry rounds, and arches blue,
Resound and echo, Hallelu!"

and, lower down, the "melodious noise" was originally succeeded by the line,

"By leaving out those harsh chromatic jars,"

which Milton's ear instinctively felt was discordant.

As an instance of the extreme and punctilious care the poet took to make his expression exactly suit his thought and his music, it may be worth the notice and analysis of the reader that he tried "ever-endless light," "ever-glorious," "uneclipsèd," "where day dwells without night," "endless morn of light," "in cloudless birth of light," "in never-parting light," before finally returning to the fifth (and certainly the best) of these seven variants.

We then come to the Letter to a Friend, twice drafted, and with innumerable small corrections, proving, in the most interesting way, the extreme importance of the crisis in Milton's life of which this epistle, with its inclosed sonnet, is the memorable record. Then come clear copies of the little odes or sacred madrigals written while Milton was at Cambridge; but here the text was already settled, and these offer us no peculiarities. Nor is there much to say about the three sonnets, which are in another and a later hand. But we now arrive at Comus, here simply called A Maske, and dated 1634. This is Milton's own writing, again, and the interlinings and canceled readings are so numerous that we are able to follow the poet in the act of composition. As in Arcades, he makes a false start, and the first twenty lines are stormily struck through.

Who has ever lived, but Milton, that was rich enough to throw away such beauties as,

"on whose banks
Eternal roses grow and hyacinths,"

or,

"I doubt me, gentle mortal, these may seem
Strange distances to hear and unknown climes"?

As we proceed, the main interest is to note the unfailing skill of Milton. He alters frequently, and in altering he invariably improves. Never was there an artist in language of so sure a hand. At the first flow of inspiration, a word will often occur to him which is a good word, but not the best. Thus, in the great Song which Comus sings in entering, the sun originally allayed his glowing axle "in the steep *Tartessian* stream." Reading it over, the hissing sound struck the poet's delicate ear, and he found *Atlantic* instead, which reduces the whole to harmony. In the last line of the Echo song, the Lady was, instead of giving "resounding grace," to "*hold a counterpoint* to all Heaven's harmonies." Here one feels that the expression was perceived by the poet to be too technical, and even a little pedantic, and certainly the mending of it is most felicitous. Some of the lost lines from Comus — so completely quenched by Milton's broad pen-mark that it seems a doubtful morality to light their wicks again even for a moment — are: —

"While I see you
This dusky hollow is a paradise
And heaven-gate 's o'er my head,"

omitted from the Lady's monologue, evidently, because it delayed it;

"So fares as did forsaken Proserpine
When the big wallowing flakes of pitchy cloud
And darkness wound her in,"

omitted from the Second Brother's speech to make room for the more practical suggestion that their sister is in

"the direful grasp
Of savage hunger or of savage beast."

From the famous praise of chastity is dropped a line, —

"And yawning dens where glaring monsters house;"

very fine in itself, but canceled, doubtless, as overemphatic in that position. Perhaps nothing will give a more interesting impression of the manuscript than a quotation from the Spirit's Epilogue to Comus as it first left Milton's pen. For purposes of comparison with the present text, I print in italics all the words which the poet altered: —

"Then I suck the liquid air
All amidst the gardens fair
Of *Atlas*, and his *nieces* three
That sing about the golden tree."

The next four lines, as we have them, were an afterthought. The first draft proceeds: —

"There eternal summer dwells,
And west winds, with musky wing,
About the *myrtle* alleys fling
Balm and cassia's *fragrant* smells.
Iris there with *garnished* bow
Waters the odorous banks that blow
Flowers of more mingled hew
Than her *watchet* scarf can shew,
Yellow, watchet, green and blue,
And drenches oft with *manna* dew," etc.

In every case the changes will be found to be an improvement. After meeting Hesperus and his daughters, we cannot away with Atlas and his nieces, while the most rudimentary ear must feel the improvement gained by substituting "cedarn" for "myrtle," and "Nard" for "Balm." Yet this first text was extremely pretty, and it wanted an artist of the highest sensitiveness to divine that what was good might thus give way for what was even better. In the second draft, among the seven-syllable lines, there suddenly burst out a splendid Alexandrine, —

"Where grows the right-born gold upon his native tree,"

only to be instantly canceled by the master.

And now, with deep emotion, we turn to an examination of Lycidas. My impression of the manuscript of Comus is that it represents the actual first conception, that here we see the poem sprouting and rustling from Apollo's head. But certainly Lycidas had either been in part already scribbled down, or the author had worked it in his brain until much of it had reached its final form. Here long and elaborate passages are written as they now stand, and without a single erasure. The manuscript is dated "Novemb: 1637," and this note precedes the poem: "In this Monodie the author bewails a lerned freind unfortunatly drownd in his passage from Chester on the Irish seas 1637." The only lines of the poem in which we find much to note are those in which the image of Orpheus is introduced. The famous quotation is hardly to be recognized in, —

"What could the golden-haired Calliope
For her enchanting son,
When she beheld (the gods far-sighted be)
His gory scalp roll down the Thracian lea."

The succeeding pages of this wonderful volume take us from the consideration of work completed to that of work suggested, long abandoned, and finally revived in a totally different form. Here we have the evidence that, while he was at Horton, Milton was closely occupied with the idea of writing several great poems on Biblical subjects. He had formed, alone among his contemporaries, the noblest conceptions of the function of poetry. He declared it to be "a work not to be raised from the heat of youth, or the vapours of wine, like that which flows at waste from the pen of some vulgar amorist . . . nor to be obtained by the invocation of Dame Mem-

ory and her seven daughters, but by devout prayer to that Eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases." Solemnly convinced that his own lips had been touched by this coal of consecration, Milton set himself thus early to write sacred tragedies. He sketches in this manuscript, more or less fully, a Paradise Lost, an Adam Unparadised, an Abram in Egypt, a Deluge, a Sodom Burning, and names or suggests innumerable other themes.

Milton's idea appears to have been, in every case, originally dramatic. He proposed to write choral plays on these Biblical subjects, and what is very curious is that, while nothing then existed of this kind in modern English poetry, the very subjects which Milton selected, and left unworked, at Horton, before 1638, were used by the Dutch poet Joost van Vondel, from whose Lucifer Milton was afterward to borrow. I do not think that the abundance of these coincidences — for they can be no more — has ever been pointed out. Vondel was to produce a Biblical drama of Solomon, in 1648, of Samson, of King David in Exile, of Adam Unparadised, of Noah, all subjects which were directly chosen for analogous treatment by Milton. On the other hand, it is very remarkable that the themes which had already been treated by Vondel, such as The Israelites going out of Egypt, (1612) and the various developments of the life of Joseph, are particularly omitted by Milton. This looks as though, among the wealth of books, new and old, which came to him at Horton, the early quartos of the greatest of Dutch poets may have been included. He would be induced to sketch more or less similar dramas, avoiding the subjects hitherto treated by Vondel. But while Milton lingered, the immense life of the Dutch poet rolled on, and one by one he unconsciously took up the very subjects which Milton had confided to his notebook before 1638.

Besides the Biblical subjects suggested for dramas, we find the scheme of a great epic, to be called Britain's Troy. Of this, the contents of no fewer than thirty-three books or scenes are indicated. This, without question, was the mode in which Milton intended to carry out the design, of which he speaks in a Latin poem of 1638, "Indigenas revocebo in carmina reges," — "I will recall to life in songs our native kings." But in this purely Saxon epic, Arthur, whom also Milton proposed to celebrate, would have had no place. It was to have been a chronicle of the East Anglian kings, from Vortigern to Edward the Confessor, and the notes which Milton has left do not inspire us with any keen regret that the "inward prompting" which led him to take up so dusty a theme persuaded him also to abandon it.

It has been noted by Mr. Aldis Wright that after Milton had written Comus in 1634, Lycidas in 1637, and certain memoranda still later, he went back to his first quire of paper, and made use of one of its blank pages for the sonnets, which may be as late as 1645. We have a curious impression that this folio of leaves was the only medium by which, during a long series of years, Milton communicated his thoughts to the world. As I have said before, it would be interesting enough, if this manuscript represented a fair copy made by the poet himself of certain of his early works. Yet, as we have seen, it is much more than that. With the exception of L'Allegro and Il Penseroso, which have accidentally dropped from the unbound volume, or else were hewn roughly out of the marble elsewhere, these pages form Milton's poetical workshop. Moreover, the collection is, with those exceptions, complete. Between the Song on May Morning, written at Cambridge in the spring of 1631, and the Latin and Italian pieces composed in Italy in 1639, there

does not seem to exist another copy of Milton's verses which does not occur in the Trinity manuscript.

We are surprised, though with a happy wonderment, that a life of intense communion with nature, and not of solitude and ease, should have produced so small a sheaf of poetry. But here all is of the first order; all, or nearly all, is practically perfect. It was one of Milton's most extraordinary qualities of will that, with his determined desire to be a great poet, he was yet able to force himself to be silent save when the fiercest passion of genius burned in him. Hence the "mind made and set wholly on the accomplishment of greatest things," "the inward prompting . . . to leave something so written to after times, as they should not willingly let it die," the "long choosing" and the "beginning late," resulted, in the course of seven years of exquisite tranquillity, in a cluster of some eighteen hundred lines. An active person could copy out the whole of Milton's Horton poems in two days, and not be wearied. Yet if the sheaf be slender, it is composed of none but full ripe ears of the richest wheat. The art of verse would be much honored if other great poets could be induced to practice the same noble self-denial. Few men, even of high genius, are content, in their heyday, to repress the flow of their verses. If Wordsworth, for instance, could have been persuaded to put down on paper nothing which did not rise to a certain level of excellence, how had it relieved our shelves and "blessed mankind"! Even Shakespeare, we know, lacked the art to "blot." Above all other men, Milton possessed the strenuous self-criticism which forbade him even to put down on paper what was below his own topmost aim. It is very notable that in this precious volume at Trinity, in which we see the poet intimately engaged in fashioning and polishing his compositions, there is no trace of a single abandoned work. Milton attempted nothing which he failed to carry through, and the examination of these leaves gives us good reason to believe that he started no poem, not even a sonnet or a song, without being quite sure beforehand that he would be able to complete it in perfection. To all lovers of literature, this volume, which is so jealously guarded in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, is a relic of inestimable value. To those who are practically interested in the art of verse, it reads a more pregnant lesson than any other similar document in the world.

Edmund Gosse.

AN ODE IN TIME OF HESITATION.

(Written after seeing at Boston the statue of Robert Gould Shaw, killed while storming Fort Wagner, July 18, 1863, at the head of the first enlisted negro regiment, the 54th Massachusetts.)

I.

BEFORE the living bronze Saint-Gaudens made
Most fit to thrill the passer's heart with awe,
And set here in the city's talk and trade
To the good memory of Robert Shaw,
This bright March morn I stand
And hear the distant spring come up the land;
Knowing that what I hear is not unheard

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Gosse, (Sir) Edmund William
The Milton manuscripts at Trinity

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